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Basic Course Forum

The Basic Communication Course and a University-wide Critical Thinking Pedagogy Program

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This Basic Course Forum highlights authors' responses to the following topics: What curricular programs present the best opportunity for curricular connections to the basic course? Building upon conversations from the July 2018 Basic Course Institute (hosted by University of Dayton), what administrative successes and challenges do basic course directors face?

Many universities explicitly address critical thinking in their mission statements or core values, and some universities develop university-wide critical thinking programs to establish high standards in pedagogical design across disciplines. These critical thinking programs may take the form of a faculty and staff committee that offers workshops and a course certification process via peer review. Mazer, Hunt, and Kuznekoff (2008) offer the communication basic course as a showrunner of critical thinking goals in a university's general elective program. So, communication basic course faculty find themselves in unique positions to offer their basic courses as stalwart examples for their university critical thinking programs. In the event that a faculty member's university does not have an established university-wide critical thinking program, faculty may consider founding such a program on campus. To those instructors unfamiliar with programs of this nature, a university-wide critical thinking program is similar in purpose to a communication across the curriculum program. Faculty participating in both programs seek to increase standards across

university courses and may certify courses adhering to the standards. For example, Fritz and Weaver's (1986) demonstrated link of the basic course to classical rhetoric provides sound curricular planning; however, instructors can improve their students' critical thinking outcomes by following cross-discipline standards that incorporate assessment tools. University-wide standards ensure students encounter critical thinking pedagogy throughout their college careers in various content areas, and faculty teaching the communication basic course could benefit from universal pedagogical standards by attending design workshops and using assessments.

University-wide Curricular Critical Thinking Program

Students and instructors can profit from cross-discipline critical thinking programming at their universities. For instance, some universities may adopt critical thinking as a specific component of the university's quality enhancement plan for accreditation purposes.² Organizations, such as the Foundation for Critical Thinking (2017), provide guidelines for university-wide implementation of critical thinking pedagogical assessment. Paul and Elder (2009) developed a framework that addressed eight elements of thought tied to universal intellectual standards for critical analysis. By selecting such a critical thinking pedagogical framework, a university links these thinking skills across courses, thereby enhancing a student's overall educational development. University curricular programming at this level may encourage instructors to develop critical thinking learning outcomes linked to specific course activities that allow for student assessment. Ideally, a university enacting such curricular programming may develop a peer review system for university endorsement of a critical thinking course. This programming assists instructors on clarifying how they integrate critical thinking purposefully into their courses.

Critical Thinking and the Basic Course

Communication journals such as *Communication Education* and the *Basic Communication Course Annual* provide a plethora of research illustrating how instructors have promoted the inclusion of critical thinking pedagogy in the basic communication course for decades. Establishing a systematic means of teaching critical thinking in the basic course is essential for ensuring student development of

² See the following examples: Florida A & M University
http://www.famu.edu/QEP/UserFiles/File/FAMU_QEP_Feb2009.pdf; University of Louisville
<http://louisville.edu/ideastoaction/-/files/final-report.pdf>; University of Houston-Clear Lake
<https://www.uhcl.edu/about/administrative-offices/institutional-effectiveness/quality-enhancement-plan/>

this skillset. Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, and Louden (1999) revealed that students' critical thinking abilities improved as a result of taking public communication courses, such as public speaking. In addition, Sandmann (1992) argued that the basic course is the ideal course for learning critical thinking because of how communication allows for material to be presented to an audience before being evaluated critically. Essentially, communication permits the framing of material. Because of this, communication instructors find themselves in a unique situation promoting the communication of critical thought as a responsibility of the citizenry.

While communication instructors likely agree on the importance of critical thinking in the classroom, some instructors may approach the pedagogical designs of their courses differently. Fasset and Warren (2008) felt the basic communication course “lack[ed] a central narrative” that combined content and objective (pp. 4-5). Instructors should prioritize the process of thinking over the outcome (Beall, 1993) and be conscious of how students process the instructors' pedagogical practices. For instance, Zhang and Zhang (2013) revealed that an instructor's positive display of emotion encouraged students' critical thinking abilities. Likewise, Spitzberg (2011) supported the use of the Interactive Media Package of Communication and Critical Thinking survey as an individual self-reporting assessment tool to measure a student's communication competence. Although Spitzberg mentioned the IMPACCT survey required improvement regarding its link between critical thinking and argumentation, this acceptance of an assessment tool begs for an assessment program adhered to by instructors to develop the basic course in efforts to improve students' critical thinking skills in the classroom. We may take it for granted that communication instructors integrate critical thinking into the classroom, but a programmatic approach ensures that instructors embed critical thinking components into course activities. As previously stated, Fritz and Weaver (1986) relied on classical rhetoric to guide the teaching of critical thinking in the basic course classroom. Critical thinking should not be taken for granted, and seminars designed for instructors on the matter ensure that all university faculty are subjected to the necessary tools for integrating critical thought into their classrooms.

Conclusion

Adhering to established critical thinking pedagogical programs affords faculty with structured integration of critical thinking into their basic courses. Allen et al. (1999) suggested increasing components of argumentation in the public speaking course. University curricular programming establishes the working structure for

instructors to fulfill calls such as this. A curricular structure promoting links between outcomes and activities allows instructors to put creative ideas into practice. Again, some instructors may feel these curricular structures to be obvious steps; however, surely all instructors can agree that a mechanism for peer review will serve to enhance success for a student's critical thinking ability and an instructor's ability to implement critical thinking pedagogical practices. Mazer et al. (2008) called for faculty and administrators to perform critical thinking assessment. Faculty participation in university-wide critical thinking programs builds on that call.

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